

A NOSTALGIC TOUCH OF HUMOR

We Knew the Real Killer Before the First Commercial Break

By Matthew Keenan, Shook, Hardy & Bacon, Kansas City, Mo.

In case you haven't noticed, lawyer shows are the rage these days. "Law & Order" and "Boston Legal" are just two of them. I suspect most lawyers have little interest in fictional accounts of our profession. But many of my nonlawyer friends watch these shows. So I watched one. It was "Boston Legal" — whose senior partner is William Shatner, who went from Captain Kirk to the lead partner in a Boston law firm. The episode was the most preposterous thing I have ever seen. It was fiction beyond a screenwriter's wildest dreams. Shatner was more believable when he wore a polyester jump suit and barked out commands to Sulu.

You see, I'm an expert on Hollywood and the law. I grew up watching "Perry Mason." In 1972 in Barton County, our home got two television channels, both beamed in from Wichita. Based on the signal strength, Mars seemed closer. And on channel 12, the afternoon show was "Perry Mason." In one hour you had a murder, an arrest, Mason retained, witnesses interviewed, alibis developed, and then the courtroom scene. Perry Mason was our star. It was real TV, real lawyering. For some reason the programming guy at KAKE 12 thought that 10-year-old kids would watch this stuff over cartoons. And we did. In spades.

Back then the practice of law was simple. Perry had no use for the billable hour. No retainer. Justice was in demand and Mason was happy to deliver. My two brothers and I sat and watched every episode. The stock in trade for most episodes was blackmail schemes with embarrassing photos. Like a man caught with his shirt off or something else incredibly benign by today's standards. The shows had great titles, which Google helped me find: "The Case of the Lazy Lover," "The Case of the Screaming Woman," "The Case of the Fatal Fortune," and "The Case of the Runaway Corpse." In contrast, "Boston Legal" has shows titled "Breast in Show" (aired in February).

Perry's success was due to his crack team, Della Street and Paul Drake. Della was so much more than just a secretary. She was a know-it-all without being a know-it-all. Paul Drake was like her male clone. He was part detective, part paralegal, and all dedication. He knew everyone and everything. In almost every plot Perry would hit some dead end, and things would look bleak. That's when Paul would say something like "I have a bartender friend downtown who knows something about handgun ballistics. I'll go pay him a visit." Five minutes later, he would return with a gleam in his eye. He broke the case but couldn't say anything until after the commercial break.

The Internet is brimming with Web pages dedicated to this stuff. I found it interesting that someone has spent hours piecing together dialogue between Paul and Della to prove they

were actually having an affair behind Perry's back. I immediately called my brother, Marty, for his reaction. "That's outrageous," he blurted. "You and I know Della was too dedicated to try any hanky panky. Plus, she adored Perry. That was clear from the outset." I agreed.

Anyway, back to Perry. He was fully capable of acquitting his client and obtaining a confession at the same time. Seconds apart. The suspect was never hiding out on some distant island. There was no "America's Most Wanted" because no one went on the lam. Instead they were in court, awaiting the moment when they spilled their guts. The Fifth Amendment, as far we knew back then, had not been added to the Constitution.

The confession was dramatic. It often involved some jealous love interest. They not only confessed, they went into detail with motive and everything. It was like a "confession in a box." The show would be 45 seconds from concluding. I would sit there and say, "How are they going to wrap this up?" And then it would happen. The camera would go into the assembled courtroom galley. Some woman would start to cry. "He lied to me. He said we would get married, but he lied. He had photos, too. I had no choice. I did it. I shot him in the back. I'm sorry." She would fall to the ground and faint. The camera would fade to Perry, and he would nod as if to say, "I knew it all along."

District Attorney Burger was the embodiment of the team that plays the Harlem Globe Trotters and has never won a basketball game. He deserved an Emmy. When he looked shocked, amazed, and stunned you actually believed him. There were other bit players, like detectives and policemen, but they didn't matter. At the end of the show, there was always a scene where they tied up loose ends and made certain viewers were able to connect all the dots and understand the various plot lines. That was one part of the show we never watched. Such spoon feeding was best left to grade-school kids in places like Derby. We knew the real killer before the first commercial break. ■

About the Author



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